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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002496

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SUBJECT: TFGG01: MIXED SIGNALS ON RUSSIAN TROOP WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: PolCouns Alice Wells: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary. Russia continues to send mixed signals on when Russian troops will withdraw from Georgia, as well as the size of the peacekeeping force it expects to leave behind in South Ossetia and in the security zone located in Georgia proper. Despite Medvedev's promises to withdraw Russian troops starting August 18, later revised to a withdrawal by August 22, the removal of troops has only just begun, raising some questions regarding Medvedev's standing within harder-line GOR circles. While Medvedev first called for a stronger role for the OSCE mission in South Ossetia, Russia is now only willing to allow OSCE monitors into a buffer zone in Georgia, abutting South Ossetia, and only in order to monitor Georgian activity. Russia has ruled out EU monitors in South Ossetia, purportedly due to objections of local authorities. End Summary.

Did Russian Troops Begin Withdrawal?

12. (U) Statements made by the Russian leadership have sent confusing signals on the pace and scope of the Russian withdrawal under the 6-Point Plan. President Medvedev had originally announced in an August 17 phone conversation with French President Sarkozy that Russia would begin on August 18 the pullout of its troops, which had been sent to reinforce the Russian peacekeepers, to the security area agreed upon by the Joint Control Commission (JCC) in 1999. Without explicitly linking the two issues, during that call Medvedev also called upon the Georgian side to return its military units to their home bases.

13. (U) On August 18, an MFA statement confirmed that August 18 was the date for the beginning of the troop withdrawal, but specified that "the speed of our steps will depend on how conscientiously Tbilisi will fulfill that which is demanded of it."

14. (U) In his August 18 press conference, General Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, Deputy Chief of General Staff, clarified that President Medvedev in his August 17 phone call with Medvedev had only spoken of a "pullback" of forces, as opposed to a pullout. Troops would not be "withdrawn" from the area, he stated. Nogovitsyn also confirmed that Russian armed forces would erect a permanent base on South Ossetian soil, if South Ossetian authorities were to make such a request. He noted that this would be a political, not military, decision.

15. (U) On August 19, Medvedev, in a second telephone call with Sarkozy, asserted Russia was withdrawing its troops from Georgia, and that by August 22 some of the peacekeepers would be pulled into the provisional security zone as delineated by the 1999 JCC decision. Medvedev noted that by August 22, checkpoints and accommodation facilities would be ready for the peacekeepers. The troops sent to support the peacekeepers would relocate to South Ossetia or Russia, Medvedev told Sarkozy, with the Kremlin statement not specifying the size of the contingent it intended to leave

inside South Ossetia.

¶16. (U) In an August 19 press conference, Nogovitsyn said Russia "continued" to pull out its forces from Georgian territory, but accused Georgia of not withdrawing its forces from the conflict zone. Up to this point, there was no outside confirmation that a withdrawal was actually happening.

¶17. (U) Nogovitsyn in his August 20 press conference elaborated that two lines of Russian military posts for 272 peacekeepers would be erected in a "security zone." Eight posts would be at the edge of this "buffer zone" in Georgia, 10 along the administrative border of South Ossetia. The security zone would follow the administrative border between South Ossetia and Georgia proper, abutting South Ossetia from the Georgian side. Nogovitsyn claimed Russian forces had not violated any agreements, and that the "buffer zone" was part of the Russian side's area of responsibility. He clarified that Gori was not part of the buffer zone. An unnamed MOD source noted that the total number of troops remaining in Georgia, including South Ossetia, would therefore exceed the original number of peacekeepers (given in the press as 588 at the time of the outbreak of the conflict) by "several times," and include tanks and artillery.

¶18. (U) Russian infantry commander Colonel Konashenkov announced August 20 that the first troops would begin withdrawing from Gori. His only explanation for the delay was that it always takes longer to withdraw troops than to insert them into an area. An unnamed lieutenant colonel attached to the 58th Army told Reuters that day that troops had begun to withdraw from Gori in the direction of

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Vladikavkaz via Tskhinvali, including six APCs, three T-90 tanks, and a self-propelled missile launcher.

¶19. (U) On August 21, Interfax announced that a convoy of more than 40 Russian military vehicles had passed through Tskhinvali en route for the Russian republic of North Ossetia. The MOD said the units belonged to the 58th Army.

Russia develops its position on OSCE monitors

¶10. (U) On August 16, President Medvedev in a phone call with Finnish President Halonen advocated a stronger role for the OSCE mission in South Ossetia and "stressed the readiness of the Russian side for close interaction" with the mission.

¶11. (U) On August 18, the MFA in its statement repeated Russia's support for an increase in OSCE monitors, but called for that contingent to monitor Georgian "provocative actions."

¶12. (U) The MFA published a statement on August 19 referring to the OSCE decision to increase the number of OSCE monitors to 100, saying that 20 would begin their work "in the nearest future, in regions of Georgia adjacent to South Ossetia." Their task would be to monitor the "Georgian authorities' fulfillment of all their obligations," including the return of Georgian troops to their bases.

¶13. (U) On August 20, the Russian OSCE PermRep Voronkov told Russian newspaper Rossiskaya Gazeta that Russia was ready to approve monitors in the security zone, carefully delimiting the zone as territory that abuts South Ossetia from the Georgian side. The modality of this force's deployment would have to be worked out carefully, he noted. Voronkov speculated that the OSCE contingent could comprise 10-20 persons. He warned that absent a careful mandate, more monitors could only complicate the effort. He asserted that only OSCE monitors could operate in the security zone, noting that Russia was a member of the OSCE, but not of other organizations intent on sending monitors, such as the EU. Voronkov said that according to international law, EU observers could only enter South Ossetia with consent from

local authorities. This consent would not be forthcoming, as South Ossetian officials had several times declared that they "didn't want to see any other observers except for Russian peacekeepers."

Comment

¶14. (C) Russia is intent on undertaking this withdrawal on its own terms and it's similarly hard-line approach on the dispatch and mandate of the OSCE MMO's reflects its strategy of remaining the "guarantor" of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Some questions have been raised by the seemingly tardy implementations of Medvedev's injunction for an August 22 withdrawal, which -- if ignored or easily superceded -- would reinforce a "weak" President to a strong "silovik" circle around Putin. Putin has been silent on the withdrawal. End Comment.
BEYRLE